

NEWS

**A HIGH-TECH EYE ON THE KIDS / Fear of kidnappings prompts parents to try satellite tracking**

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Even before the most recent barrage of news stories about child kidnappings, Trina and Rob Dean fretted about the safety of their two preschool-aged daughters.

That's why the Menlo Park couple ordered two \$400 wristwatches that use a combination of satellite and cellular telephone technology to keep track of their daughters, even if the unspeakable happened.

The price tag -- plus a \$25 monthly service charge -- is a budget breaker, and the Deans admit they may be overly paranoid. Still, Trina Dean said, "It just seemed to us it was worth putting \$800 on a credit card and know we've done everything we can to keep them safe."

The Deans are among thousands of customers who Wherify Wireless Inc. says have ordered a GPS Personal Locator for Children, even though the Redwood Shores firm won't start shipping the devices until next month.

With stories about missing and abducted children such as Samantha Runnion, Danielle van Dam and Elizabeth Smart seemingly making headlines every week, Wherify and makers of similar tracking devices that use satellite technology are receiving an increasing number of calls from consumers and the media.

But the heightened attention on Wherify and competitors like Digital Angel Corp. and GPS Tracks Inc. prompted the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to issue a warning, cautioning parents not to be scared into buying expensive, high-tech gadgets.

Instead, the center said, most parents could do educating their kids to recognize and avoid danger.

The Alexandria, Va., center, founded by "America's Most Wanted" host John Walsh, noted that national crime statistics show that abduction of children by strangers remains rare, even though the news media are paying more attention to the crime.

There were 115 cases in 1999, the last full year for which such statistics are available. In the 1980s, there were 200 to 300 cases a year, the center said.

The FBI's National Crime Information Center said there were 725,000 reports of missing children last year, although the majority were runaways and abductions by family members.

**SUPERVISION STILL REIGNS**

Ernie Allen, president and chief executive of the center for missing children, was careful not to knock the new high-tech devices, but said none that he has seen can totally replace good old- fashioned parental supervision.

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"So many of these devices are almost inescapably marketing fear," he said. "We are strong believers in technology if it can be provided at a low or reasonable cost so that lots of families could take advantage of it."

Allen's warning sparked an angry rebuke from Marc Klaas, whose daughter, Polly Klaas, was kidnapped from her Petaluma home and murdered in 1993. Although he has no financial stake in the company, Klaas passionately endorsed the Wherify tracker as an important tool in what he called a war against predators.

"If my daughter had something like that on her, she could easily be alive today," said Klaas, founder of the KlassKids Foundation of Sausalito.

"How cautious can you be?" he said. "We're talking about children's lives here. If a kid's missing, you've got to pull out all the stops."

### FEAR OR PEACE OF MIND?

The companies marketing child tracking devices say they aren't selling fear, but some peace of mind for parents.

The GPS Personal Locator is a thick, rubberized wristwatch that locks on a child's wrist. It sends an emergency signal to 911 operators if someone attempts to remove or cut the band without authorization and can be programmed to send an alert if the child ventures outside of a predetermined area. The locator also has a "panic button" the child can push to call 911.

The device taps the Global Positioning System, a constellation of 24 satellites originally sent into orbit as a navigational tool by the U.S. Department of Defense in the late 1970s. By triangulating the radio signals from three of the satellites, a GPS receiver can plot its exact location on the ground to within a few feet.

### MANY USES FOR TECHNOLOGY

GPS receivers are already used to track stolen cars and may soon spread to cellular phones. The Federal Communications Commission is requiring wireless carriers to implement new technology to pinpoint the locations of 911 cell phone calls, possibly by embedding GPS chips in phones.

Wherify President Timothy Neher founded the privately held company in 1998 after he briefly lost track of his brother's young children while at the zoo.

Parents can track their kids by logging on to a Web site that displays their location either on a regular street map or an aerial photograph. Parents can even program the device to give "breadcrumbs," recording the GPS signal at set intervals to monitor their child's progress from school to home.

Cellular phone signals keep the receiver in touch with Wherify data centers in Florida, Colorado and Sunnyvale and compensate for areas that a GPS signal cannot work, such as inside buildings.

### THOUSANDS OF ORDERS

Although he wouldn't provide an exact number, Neher said thousands of customers have placed orders and that the firm projects selling 150,000 units in the next year.

The Deans, who did not want their daughters' first names, ages or photographs printed to help keep them from becoming targets, signed up for a Wherify watch in the summer of 2001 after seeing a demonstration on "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

Trina Dean said she was overwhelmed at first by the high price, then decided, "I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if something were to happen and I knew about these devices, no

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matter what the cost."

Wherify's Neher wants to make future versions of his device smaller and cheaper.

"I want to try to find a way to get this to a point where I could give them to every kid in America," Neher said. "There's nothing better than holding a child's hand. Where we come into play is that next level. It's a backup tool. Nothing is ever going to be foolproof."

### OTHER MODELS AVAILABLE

The Digital Angel, which is a two-piece combination of a watch and pager-size GPS locator, works the same way as the Personal Locator and costs \$400 plus a \$30 monthly service fee. It's made by Digital Angel Systems Inc. of Riverside, a division of Digital Angel Corp. of South St. Paul, Minn.

The Digital Angel was designed for a wider variety of uses, from tracking pets and vehicles to people with medical conditions such as Alzheimer's.

The company has sold only 200 units since they introduced the first prototype last November, but with kidnappings becoming a "hot topic," the firm is now fielding several calls per day from consumers, reporters and law enforcement officials, said company President Amro Albanna.

"I sure hope it doesn't become a big business, because that means a lot of small kids are being kidnapped," Albanna said. "If it unfortunately does become a big business, the good news is we have something to prevent the problem as much as we can."

Last month, the firm announced a new one-piece unit, with a temperature monitor, that will be as small as a matchbook. The firm expects to start selling the new model by early 2003.

### NEXT STEP IS IMPLANTS

And in a sign of future tracking technologies, Digital Angel's majority owner, Applied Digital Solutions Inc. of Palm Beach, Fla., has developed the VeriChip, a microchip the size of a grain of rice that can be implanted in a person's body. One Florida family this year had chips embedded with their individual medical records implanted in their bodies. The chip, which in the future could incorporate a GPS receiver, has already generated criticism from privacy advocates who say the technology opens a new high-tech Pandora's box.

Jennifer Durst, president of GPS Tracks Inc. of Dallas, originally intended her product as a lost-pet finder to stay away from the "Big Brother" issues of tracking people.

However, the single mother of two realized soon after starting the company three years ago that placing tracking devices on children or the elderly gave their loved ones a certain peace of mind that outweighed privacy concerns.

"Parents are very hot on it," said Durst, whose company's Web site ([www.gpstracks.com](http://www.gpstracks.com)) has received more than 1,000 visitors since her appearance on "The Today Show" last week.

"People are very passionate about this, especially people who have ever turned around and not seen their child for a second or people who have seen their elderly mother walk out the door and not know where she went," Durst said.

Durst hopes to have her product for sale by the end of the year. She said it should cost around \$300, plus a \$10 monthly service fee.